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Emperor and Aristocracy in Japan, 1467-1680: Resilience and  
Renewal (review)

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by the individual authors (although missing macrons and the frequent use of circumflexes instead of macrons in the maps can be disconcerting).

The editors earn a final tip of the hat for assembling a set of essays that crosses the Great Divide of 1868. Hopefully, this innovative approach will stimulate budding scholars to undertake more research on Japanese cities in the early modern and Meiji periods. It is not merely that “few historians have been ambitious enough to attempt to tell a story that straddles the change of regime,” as Fiévé and Waley note (p. 1), but outside of Japan, embarrassingly little work on either the Tokugawa or Meiji period has appeared in recent years. One encouraging sign is that several contributors to this volume are in the early stages of their careers, and we can anticipate learning more from them in the years ahead.

*Emperor and Aristocracy in Japan, 1467–1680: Resilience and Renewal.*

By Lee Butler. Harvard University Asia Center, Cambridge, Mass., 2002. ix, 412 pages. \$39.50.

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In his recent book, *In Praise of Nepotism: A Natural History*, Adam Bellow, son of Saul Bellow, defends a new trend in American society. Success in the competition for individual merit is still the highway to the plum jobs, but, increasingly, only those who are members of kin groups that already hold power can join the fray. In spite of the nondemocratic aspects of the new power distribution system, Adam Bellow sees benefits in it. Future elites will combine successful genes with optimal education and may provide better leadership than elites who hold only one of these advantages. To those who study Japan, this has a familiar ring. Such a system was, in effect, what the Taika reformers introduced and the Tokugawa refashioned; and it worked, on the whole, long and successfully.

The *tennō* held a special place within the Japanese birth-cum-merit system. Their contact persons to the outer world, namely the courtiers, the palace ladies—whether they bore the *tennō*'s children or administered his dwellings and funds—the princes, princesses, and clerics of imperial or high aristocratic descent, all belonged to the birth-cum-merit system. So did *ex-tennō*, if they politicked.

The reigning *tennō* stood outside the birth-cum-merit system. Their right to hold the post was soon shrouded in religious myth, and though merit played a role, the highest courtiers, in the absence of a clear succession stat-

ute or the word of a powerful predecessor, might decide which prince or princess was most fit to be *tennō*. Once the succession ceremonies, including ritual transfer of charisma from *tennō* ancestors, had taken place, merit was not a base of the *tennō*'s mandate. This ideology made it normal to remain on the throne even when those who wielded actual power in the name of the *tennō* changed; it also set Japan off from China, where emperors and entire dynasties fell when the efficiency of their rule, and so their merit or "Heavenly Mandate," ceased to operate.

How has the *tennō* system survived from the fifth century until our times? Hereditary monarchies are fragile. It is true that in crisis situations such a monarch can focus more unreflected loyalty than an elected head of state, some of whose subjects voted against him and think him a fool, and much more loyalty than a dictator, most of whose subjects, though cowed into silence, think he is a crook. But in normal times, the fawning, to which royals are victims from the day they are known to be successors to the throne, warps their characters. The solution, which first the Japanese, then the British, then the Dutch and the Nordic countries, invented by trial and error, is to have them "reign" only, whereas other people "rule" in their name. In Japan, monarchs who "reigned only" were normal from Heian times, and monarchs who tried to "rule," too, like Go-Toba and Go-Daigo, failed.

Monarchs who reign only, have, however, existential problems. Somebody else must provide the necessary muscle to levy taxes for their upkeep and guard their palaces; and if their own clan is divided by wars of succession, they may lose prestige among those holders of real power who provide their funds and their security. This was the situation of the *tennō* system between 1467, when the Ōnin War began, and 1680, when *ex-tennō* Go-Mizunoo, the last *tennō* who tried to resist the Tokugawa *bakufu* usurpation schemes, died, and Tsunayoshi, a civilian who shared many Confucian, Buddhist, and culturalist ideas with the Kyoto court, ascended the shogunal seat. In this period, the court and the *tennō* institution survived a series of challenges: financial penury, living quarters torched during civil wars, cynical warlords such as Nobunaga, megalomaniac warlords such as Hideyoshi, warlords who outsmarted them such as Ieyasu, and wary martinets such as his shogunal successors, Hidetada and Iemitsu. How did they do it? That is the theme of the book.

The introduction summarizes the history of the court, in particular its finances and its relations to the warriors, up to 1467. Chapter one, "The Struggle to Survive," describes how the Ōnin War influenced the courtiers. Chapter two, "Normalcy and Its Pretenses," deals with the daily life of the courtiers under the conditions of war, destruction, and penury, and in particular with their leisure activities. Chapter three, "Court Society during Reunification," explains how enterprising courtiers avoided being caught up in the strife between the last incompetent Ashikaga leaders.

In chapter four, “Unifiers and Aristocrats,” Butler documents in detail the “give and take” between court and unifiers. Chapter five, “The Crises of 1609–10,” relates the conflict between Ieyasu and Go-Yōzei-*tennō*. The latter wanted all the palace ladies—who constituted his harem, there was no queen—who had cuckolded him, and their courtier lovers, executed; Ieyasu insisted on less bloodshed, and won. Chapter six, “Codifying the Court,” deals with the rules Ieyasu laid down for the *tennō* institution, in particular the *Kinchū narabini kuge shohatto* of 1615. The 1615 rules prescribe the nature of the *tennō*’s cultural activities and reading matter (Japanese poetry and political manuals from the T’ang and Heian periods), lays down disciplinary rules for the courtiers, puts the appointments of high ecclesiastics and the conveying of honorary court ranks to warriors under full *bakufu* control, gives rules for the *tennō*’s choice of era names, and tries to solve some of the thorny preeminence problems between princes and princely clerics on the one hand and high courtiers on the other.

Chapter seven, “On Persons and Structures,” tells the story of court versus *bakufu* under Ieyasu’s successors, Hidetada and Iemitsu. Hidetada pressured Go-Yōzei to have Go-Yōzei’s successor, Go-Mizunoo, marry a daughter of Hidetada; thus Go-Mizunoo’s successor, the female Meishō-*tennō*, was Hidetada’s grandchild. To protest Hidetada’s policies against the court in the matter of ecclesiastical appointments, Go-Mizunoo abdicated in 1629. Hidetada’s successor, Iemitsu, made peace with the court in 1634 but kept it under strict surveillance in order to prevent the *tennō* from influencing any matter outside the court.

Chapter eight, “The Culture of a New Aristocracy,” points out that what the court lost in terms of real power under the Tokugawa, it regained as a cultural trendsetter for the combined elites of warrior leaders, high-ranking (and now, thanks to the *bakufu*, well-heeled) courtiers, and heads of major temples and shrines. Included in the conclusion is discussion of key terms of political discourse in fifteenth- through seventeenth-century Japan, such as *kōgi* and *tentō*, and how these terms were used by competing factions of court and camp.

The new findings of the book are, briefly: *tennō* and court played politically active and relevant roles 1467–1634 (the year Iemitsu made peace with the court); they often acted individually rather than corporatively; the *tennō* were forceful personalities and behaved accordingly; women officials efficiently ran court finances until Tokugawa times; and even after the Tokugawa had “tamed” the court, *tennō* and courtiers actively transmitted their ideals to the warrior elite.

I think Butler has proved his point—and his mining of 18 courtier diaries is in itself an impressive feat. He has also brought a great amount of new and revisionist Japanese research into the grasp of Western-language historians. The book is fluently written; notes, glossaries, bibliography, and

index are well organized, and the erudition behind it all does not crowd the text, thus the book will also be useful in class. In a reprint, however, one might consider the following points. It is true (p. 288) that Shintō was not the factor that made powerful warlords uphold the *tennō* institution. But out of traditional Shintō grew intellectually more challenging beliefs—Watarai Shintō, Yuiitsu Shintō, the later doctrines of Hayashi Razan,<sup>1</sup> and those of Yamazaki Ansai—which all emphasized that what enhanced Japan *vis-à-vis* other nations was having a perennial dynasty directly connected with the gods. The penury of the treasury and the courtiers between the Ōnin War and national unification (pp. 29–38) was a consequence of centuries of bad policy rather than of civil wars. In particular, the Kyoto government had tolerated, or even abetted (since its own dignitaries stood to gain), the subjection of state farmland and its tillers and their tax potential to private and ecclesiastical owners.<sup>2</sup> It is true (pp. 209–11) that the contents of Ieyasu's laws on court matters until and including the *Kinchū narabini kuge shohatto* did not insult the *tennō*'s dignity. But there are on record in the *Tokugawa kinreikō*<sup>3</sup> some rules by Ieyasu that did so.

Butler's translation (pp. 205–9) of the *Kinchū narabini kuge shohatto* is more precise than those by previous translators. But in Article 8, I think that *Kanchō* (as repository of auspicious *nengō*) possibly means "China" rather than the "Han period," since the term is contrasted with *honchō* later in the same article. In fact, I have found no Tokugawa-era reuses of Han-era *nengō*. The matter deserves a footnote. Article 12 on courtiers prosecuted for crimes says that *meireiritsu* shall apply. This is not only reference to the criminal codes and written laws of antiquity, but also implied favorable treatment of dignitaries: dismissal or fines instead of penal labor, exile instead of death, no judicial torture, and the higher the rank, the more privileges. The given name of the daughter of Hidetada who became Go-Mizunoo's wife (p. 281) is normally read "Kazuko" rather than "Masako," and *gige*, *hossō*, and *myōbō* rather than *gike*, *hōsō*, and *myōhō*. In the Bibliography, otherwise very thorough, one misses certain works by David Magarey Earl, Asao Naohiro, Bitō Masahide, Donald H. Shively, the late John W. Hall, and Imatani Akira.<sup>4</sup>

1. See Klaus Kracht, *Studien zur Geschichte des Denkens im Japan des 17. bis 19. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1986), p. 141.

2. See Astrid Brochlos, *Grundherrschaft in Japan—Entstehung und Struktur des Minase no shō* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001), pp. 162–73. This book includes a 70-page glossary of medieval land law and tax terms, which makes many cryptic entries in courtier diaries and letters more comprehensible.

3. See Ishii Ryōsuke, ed., *Tokugawa kinreikō*, 6 + 4 vols. + *bekkan* (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1959–61), *Zenshū* (1), pp. 4–7.

4. See David Magarey Earl, *Emperor and Nation in Japan: Political Thinkers of the Tokugawa Period* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964), Part One (Part Two deals with matters later than the scope of Butler's book). Asao Naohiro, Bitō Masahide, Donald H. Shively, and the late John W. Hall himself wrote on warriors versus the court in John W. Hall, ed.,

Butler concentrates on the court's survival strategies and demonstrates these from primary sources. But there may have been other, less palpable reasons why the court survived its ordeals. For instance: courtiers did not fight, thus they probably lived longer than warriors, and could accumulate more experience; and warlords not only employed courtiers as advisers, they even sometimes built their home bases into small replicas of Kyoto<sup>5</sup> and therefore had to keep the model going. This again was not possible without upholding the institutions that gave Kyoto its unique architectural and artistic note. The relationship between court and warriors may finally, at all times, have been complicated by religious or quasi-religious qualms on the warrior side, and by the knowledge on the courtier side that only armed power prevented the exploited peasants from rising against all kinds of landlords.

These are minor matters. Butler investigated the whole era when Japan changed from "late medieval" into "early modern" from a new angle and has mined Japanese primary and secondary sources hitherto disregarded outside Japan. His book necessitates the revision of a whole bundle of standard opinions on power relationships. It deserves wide reading.

*The Moneylenders of Late Medieval Kyoto.* By Suzanne Gay. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2001. xi, 301 pages. \$60.00, cloth; \$29.95, paper.

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In *The Moneylenders of Late Medieval Kyoto*, Suzanne Gay has produced a solid, informative volume that furthers our understanding of late medieval Japan's political and social world, and she has done it through scrutinizing a wide range of sources. Few of those sources, however, are rich in information or detail. In other words, this is a fine book built upon evidence that many of us would consider meager. Fortunately for Gay, Japanese scholars have long had interest in the topic and thus provided her a foundation upon which to undertake her work. At least one reason for that interest lies in the

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*The Cambridge History of Japan*, Vol. 4: *Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), but these contributions are not in Butler's Bibliography; nor is Imatani Akira, *Buke to tennō* (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1993).

5. See Maria-Verena Blümmel, "Das 'Kleine Kyoto'—Kulturideal des mittelalterlichen Kriegeradels," *Berliner Beiträge zur sozial- und wirtschaftswissenschaftlichen Japanforschung*, Vol. 16 (1983), pp. 17–26.